

Interview with Stephen Weiss

By Jan Polish

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I've been a fan of Stephen Weiss' models since I first got involved with origami, feeling that they have wit, style, and an extraordinary sense of life (even his money folds!). I was pleased to be able to speak with him about his work.

Jan Polish: How did you first get started with origami?

Stephen Weiss: I started folding when I was very young. I'd learned a few simple models, but then when I was 10 my grandparents sponsored a father and daughter, immigrants from Hungary, and they lived in our house. The daughter was a teenager, and every day for an hour she taught me origami, mostly traditional models. I didn't do much with origami until about 1975 or so, when I saw **Robert Harbin's** *Step by Step*, with **Patricia Crawford's** work, and started teaching myself from books. I also got **James Sakoda's** *Modern Origami* and **Samuel Randlett's** (WI) *Art of Origami*, and used versions of Harbin's *Secrets of Origami* and Randlett's *Best of Origami*. All I knew until then was a small number of traditional models, so this was quite impressive. Then in 1977 or so I started creating models.

JP: Who were your early influences?

SW: James Sakoda was a big influence. His *Modern Origami* was the first book that I folded all the way through. I particularly liked his style at that time. That clean style really influenced my work, not that I retained the angularity later on, but the sort of smooth surfaces. Another influence, as far as adding sculptured effects, was Patricia Crawford. I think that the style of my work was a combination of Sakoda and Crawford, but not necessarily their techniques.

The first model I created, in 1977, was a sphinx-like reclining cat that I got from one of Sakoda's bases, then a three-legged elephant. There were other models that haven't survived, but in 1978 I developed my squirrel, and a flat dog-in-a-doghouse. The doghouse was the first model where I conceptualized before creating - doing an experiment where I tried to visualize the folding concept before I touched the paper.

JP: How do you design your models now? Do you study the animals first?

SW: I start with an idea, without looking at the object. I have an idea of what it should look like, and when I have a rough version, I may look at a photo or the

real thing to get the exact proportions. The more realistic the model, the more difficult it is to perfect, because as it is refined, the refinements and style have to be consistent throughout the model. My giraffe was especially hard to get the proportions right ... I really did have to study giraffes. James Sakoda would say that you should never look at the animal, so that you get a better impression, but his work was more stylized than mine.

JP: Who especially impressed you at this year's convention exhibition?

SW: I was most impressed with **Dan Robinson's** (PA) Egret. It's elegant, and one of the most natural looking birds I've ever seen. The Hermit Crab competition was interesting. And I liked the work of the young folders, like **Jason Ku** (GA), **Nate Geller** (PA), Dan, **Brian Chan** (MA), **Ben Muller** (CA); they're all very talented, and very nice people. **Wensdy Whitehead** (MA) had interesting stuff; she's one of the few women creating representational models, and she has some excellent spinning tops.

JP: What trends do you see in origami?

SW: I like the fact that people like **Marc Kirschenbaum** (NY), **Jeremy Shafer** (CA), and **Nate Geller** are going back to compound subjects, like Nate's Coming Around the Mountain, and **Bernie Peyton's** (CA) Bear with a Waterfall, which I especially liked in the exhibition. Sometimes trying to do two things together cleverly brings out the best in both.

And I like the things where the shape of the animal is held in place by the tension and geometry of the paper, where you can get a natural looking shape without sculpting after you fold, where it's designed into the construction. It's a sort of **Philip Shen** approach, applied to animals. I think my gorilla is a simple example of that type of structured 3-D animal folding.